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Teaching Tips:

Using Class Discussions to Improve Oral Communication Skills

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Imagine this scenario: A small group of people has gathered to discuss complex issues, and much talking but little listening occurs. Indeed, non sequiturs outnumber sequiturs, and one would be hard pressed to call the exchange a “discussion.” Although this can be true of faculty meetings, my present concern is that a few springs ago I thought that my senior seminar was moving too far in this direction. In addition, I became dissatisfied with my peer-rating system of class participation that, in retrospect, did not clearly separate quantity and quality of contributions. What follows are steps I have taken that seem to be moving the seminar toward discussions in which points build upon one another. The surveys I mention below are posted on the electronic course- management system my college uses, Blackboard™, but could be done with other electronic or paper tools.

Step 1: “The Discussion Discussion.” I modified this exercise from an idea shared in a local discussion about teaching. The first day of class, I ask students to reflect silently for a few moments on two questions, “What makes a great discussion?” and “What kills a discussion?” I then pair students based on where they are sitting and ask them to share their responses without naming any particular course, professor, or student. When the conversations slow, I bring the group together and open the floor so we can hit the highlights of their smaller conversations. Because students have much to say on this topic, a general question like “What points came up in your pairs?” is typically sufficient to get each pair to share at least one point.

As part of the introduction to this discussion and as part of the recap, I emphasize that one of the semester’s goals is to improve our discussion skills, both as participants and as discussion leaders. I emphasize that discussion involves listening as well as talking and that our class is a practice ground for all of us to work on these skills. I also note that some students don’t like to write papers, but are required to do so for the course; likewise, even if they don’t like talking in class, they are required to do so for a successful senior seminar.

Step 2: Feedback to Discussion Leaders. Students lead discussion in pairs. After every discussion, students fill out a Discussion Survey that is modified from materials Patrick Dolan (Drew University) once shared with me and includes eight questions (discussion leaders are asked *not* to fill it out): (1) I was prepared for class today and ready to engage in a discussion of the material (true/ false), (2) The discussion leaders were organized and prepared (6-point Likert scale), (3) The discussion leaders asked good questions (6-point Likert scale), (4) Any additional activities or assignments increased my understanding of today's topic (6-point Likert scale), (5) Name at least one thing the discussion leaders did well, (6) Give the discussion leaders some constructive criticism—what could have been done differently to make this discussion better?, (7) Any other comments? (optional), (8) My overall evaluation of today's class is (6- point Likert scale). I copy the anonymous feedback and paste it into an e-mail to the discussion leaders that concludes with comments about what I thought they did well and suggestions for future turns at leading a discussion.

Step 3: Feedback to Participants. Four times throughout the semester students fill out a Participation Survey. For each student, including themselves, they respond to three questions: (1) X needs to talk more, talks about the right amount, needs to talk less (*quantity* rating), (2) X's contribution to discussions has been (6-point Likert-scale *quality* rating that ranges from *Unacceptable—has added nothing to discussions* to *Outstanding—in every class comments have been helpful*), and (3) an open-ended question about a comment the student would like to share about X's role in discussions as leader or participant. Again, I take the anonymous feedback and paste it into an e-mail to each student. Comments have always been so constructive that I have not needed to edit them or add additional points, although I have this option. Note that with this rating system, dominating discussion will likely result in high numbers of “needs to talk less” responses.

My impression is that these steps have (a) increased listening and student comments that respond to what other students have said and (b) decreased incidents of students jumping in with their prepared responses to the readings regardless of what was just stated. In addition, several specific outcomes have encouraged me to continue with this approach to discussions. One involves a student who had failed prior discussion courses because of her lack of participation. The first Participation Survey showed 100% indicated that she needed to talk more, but the quality rating indicated that 100% also rated the comments she did make as good or excellent! She improved her participation throughout the semester, and the surveys reflected her progress, including the final survey where 82% indicated that she talked the right amount, and her quality ratings remained high. As a second example, within weeks of graduation, one student e-mailed me to say that he and two co-workers “were asked by our boss to quickly think of a way to lead a discussion for all the new employees...Largely thanks to our [senior seminar], I was able to help plan a great...session that lasted almost an hour. I'm starting to see how to apply the things I learned from my major.” This strategy does not prevent some suboptimal discussions, but it has reduced their frequency and focuses students on improving skills more than “performing.”

For more information about how I set up discussions in my syllabus, see

<http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/syllabi.php?category=Capstone>, the web site Ruth Ault mentioned in the Summer 2007 Teaching Tips column. As much as I enjoy sharing my teaching ideas, I'd love to hear some of your ideas—please contact me with possible Teaching Tips columns (roughly 1,000 words) at krmulthaup@davidson.edu.